

# The Making of a New Transnational Integration Discourse: The case of the Greek-Australian migrants in the 1940s\*

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This paper will present a history of the formation and goals of the Confederation of Greek Organisations in Australia, the first national federation of Greek-Australian community organisations, established in October 1949. The purpose of the proposed organisation was to facilitate and co-ordinate political programs that extended beyond the narrow confines of the power struggles taking place between the Greek Orthodox Community organisations and the Greek Church authorities in Australia. In our paper we will draw upon the history of the Confederation's formation to show how the transnational discourse of the confederating community organisations on the one hand distinguished them from the Greek Orthodox Community organisations which relied upon an insular nationalist discourse and on the other drew them towards the internationally emerging human rights discourse of the time. Against the background of the historical record we will also make some methodological observations in relation to current diaspora and transnationalism studies.

## Introduction

One of the questions that arises within contemporary academic discussions of transnationalism concerns the relationship between transnationalism as a social phenomenon and the theorisation of issues such as migrant agency and assimilation/integration models within migration studies. The latter issues give rise to concerns about

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the methodological implications of relying on a descriptive use of the term “transnational” that refers merely to the ties that migrants maintain with their countries of origin. Take as an example the problem of “groupism” — the research tendency to presuppose the metaphysics of bounded communities and identities — that Rogers Brubaker has identified (Brubaker, 2004). Groupism, in Brubaker’s sense, accords with an understanding of the transnational in its descriptive sense in so far as the latter enables classification of the members of migrant communities into community groups — and hence discrete objects of inquiry — on the basis of their (national) origins, quite apart from migrants’ own diverse orientations to their relationships with, and actions in relation to, their countries of origin. Sociological and social historical investigations of migrants’ agency and their situations within destination countries are thus framed by the research’s *pre-given* determination of migrant community membership via assumptions about the operations of transnational phenomena. Similarly, the currently controversial issue of granting migrants and transborder minorities transnational citizenship can also be framed on the basis of a descriptive use of the term, as Rainer Bauböck’s recent formulation of the issue attests:

Migrants who are permanent residents in a receiving society but retain strong economic, social, cultural and family ties with a sending country have a plausible claim to citizenship in both polities since they are in a position where their lives will be strongly affected by political decisions in both states and where protection of their rights may depend on formal recognition as citizens of these states. Couldn’t a similar case be built for minorities who have been shifted into another state’s jurisdiction through the drawing of a new international border? (Bauböck, 2007:2).

In this context, the descriptive use of the term “transnational” refers to “an overlapping structure of membership in two or more polities, with significant elements of citizenship status and rights in each” (Bauböck, 2007:2 f1). This use has implications for the ways in which problems deemed worthy of study are to be framed. For instance, the problem of determining the normative question whether a state’s imposition of constraints on transnational citizenship can be justified in the case where the demarcation of political boundaries and territorial borders between sending and receiving countries is at issue. Bauböck’s elaboration of various model responses to this problem (Bauböck, 2007:4–8) presupposes a market conception of state-to-state and state-to-citizen relations along the lines of those holding between service providers and consumers. Here, transnational political loyalties reduce to consumers’ preferences for political states in their capacity as different service providers. Accordingly, in the case of immigrants — in contrast to transborder minorities formed through the very processes of state border formations — Bauböck concludes:

Immigration countries must not only give immigrants access to citizenship but ought to accept also that these new citizens have relevant stakes in countries of origin that they cannot be asked to abandon as a precondition for citizenship in the receiving society. Immigrants who are offered such opportunities for transnational citizenship will have to accept in turn that as citizens of their new country they do not form a separate polity with a claim

to self-government. They are admitted as individuals with liberties and opportunities to form ethnic, religious and cultural groups, but not as national minorities (Bauböck, 2007:14–15).

Bauböck's normative position is problematic in so far as it takes it for granted that an immigration state's *admission* of immigrants "as individuals" and "not as national minorities" is co-extensive with that state's implementation of immigrant *settlement* policies with a parallel focus on the individual rather than the ethnic group with which he or she is identified in practice. Yet our study of the position of Australia's southern European migrants as what we call the "perpetual-foreigners-within" indicates that such an assumption is unfounded. Despite receiving southern European immigrants in their capacity as "individuals" with the potential to gain formal citizenship status, throughout the twentieth century the Australian state apparatus periodically called upon southern European immigrants collectively and individually to conform to one of three images of the perpetual-foreigner-within, namely as "subversive", "compliant" or "submissive" (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004a:55–80, 269–280; Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004b).

Bauböck's failure to anticipate any divergence in the state's approaches to admitting immigrants as compared with their post-arrival management is not the result of an oversight but indicates a methodological weakness in the framing of the issues. To explore the limits of merely descriptive conceptions of transnationalism that underpin current discussions our paper will draw on the historical record of Greek-Australian community activism. In particular we will focus on the formulation of a new transnational discourse in the context of the migrant settlement conditions of the 1940s that saw the emergence of a first attempt by the organised communities to establish an inclusive, nation-wide, democratically run federated association. Elsewhere we have attributed this effort on the one hand to the challenges posed by the settlement needs of the "νεομετανάστες" (new migrants) arriving in the post-war period and on the other to the sympathy of a significant number of regional organisations with the complaint that the older established Greek Orthodox Community Associations (GOCs) had failed to live up to the demands of genuine representation of the communities (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004a:172–174). In providing this historical point of contrast in this paper, we want to suggest why the current tendency to think of the phenomenon of transnationalism descriptively risks generating a blind spot with respect to the study of migrants' agency and settlement issues. By way of introduction we also note, following Rogers Brubaker's treatment of the related category of diaspora, that the Greek-Australian transnationalism we will examine invokes "a category of practice", "an idiom, a stance, a claim" rather than appealing to some bounded entity in the substantialist terms of an ethnic minority (Brubaker, 2005:12; Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2005). In so far as "it is used to make claims, to articulate projects, to formulate expectations to mobilise energies, to appeal to loyalties", like diaspora on Brubaker's analysis, transnational discourse too invokes "strong normative change. It does not so much *describe* the world as seek to *remake* it"

(Brubaker, 2005:12). Our paper will thus also provide empirical support for the view that theorising transnationalism today is best linked, not to mere descriptions of the homeland ties characterising otherwise substantially preconceived ethnic communities, but to the practices of community groups where such groups are constituted *through their practices*. Let us turn now to the historical record.

## The need for a confederation of Greek-Australian organisations

On 16 October 1948 Sydney hosted the first national “Conference of Greek Organisations in Australia”. Representatives from eleven organisations attended the meeting and a further eight sent greetings. For the record we note that Alekos Doukas arrived from Melbourne on behalf of the Orpheas Club. Also arriving from Melbourne, Vasilis Stefanou and Tom Gergou represented the Greek Democritus Workers’ League, and Kipros Kouris the Cypriot Brotherhood. Manolis Katahanas attended on behalf of Brisbane’s Rigas Fereos. Dimitris Gelis and Spiros Vourakis represented the Association of Greek Seamen. Vasilis Boskos, Kostantinos Valamis and Nikiforos Tersanskis attended on behalf of the Macedonian Brotherhoods of Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide respectively. Yannis Ledakis attended on behalf of Sydney’s Simaiki Brotherhood. Triantafilos Kotsornithis, Spiros Pavlou, Dimitris Mitsopoulos, George Yeorgaris and Dimitris Kalomiris represented Sydney’s Greek Atlas League (CGOA Minutes, 16 October 1948). Amongst those who sent greetings and words of support for the conference objectives were: Adelaide’s Paneladiki Enosi, the Greek Workers’ League Platon of Mildura, Melbourne’s Kastellorizian Brotherhood, The Greek Orthodox Community of Newcastle, Perth’s Macedonian Brotherhood, New Zealand’s Panellinia Enosi and Dimokratikos Sillogos, and the Olympic Youth clubs of Melbourne and Adelaide.

The conference participants had a clear sense of the future historical significance of their meeting. According to the Greek Atlas League President Triantafilos Kotsornithis, who officially launched the proceedings, never before had the community attempted to initiate a process for establishing a central organising body whose political programs were to extend beyond the narrow confines of the ongoing struggles for power between the Greek Church authorities and the Greek Orthodox Community organisations of Australia (CGOA Minutes, 16 October 1948:1).<sup>1</sup> Tom Gergou was elected to preside over the conference. Calling on delegates to report on the issues that had brought them together Gergou summed up the priority areas under four headings: first, the political situation in Greece; second, the co-ordination of the Australian relief effort in support of the Greek people; third, issues affecting the Greeks of Australia; and fourth, the cultivation of good relations with the Australian people.

<sup>1</sup> On these power struggles see Tsounis (1971) and Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos (2004a:105–118).

Following Vasilis Stefanou's report on the political situation in Greece the meeting endorsed a resolution in support of reconciliation in Greece. Greeks should be free to live without fear of death, imprisonment or exile on the ground of their political affiliations. The motion called upon "every friend of freedom, every friend of humanity" to advocate immediate peace negotiations (CGOA Minutes, 16 October 1948:2). It also called upon the United Nations to take action to facilitate peace negotiations and upon all Greek community organisations to play a part in the process of reinstating democracy and justice to Greece (CGOA Minutes, 16 October 1948:2). The meeting raised concerns at a time when the fear of political persecution had also become a part of daily life in Australia (Gibson, 1966; Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004a:159–183). The resolution was to be distributed widely to the governments of Greece and Australia, the governments of the Allied Forces, the United Nations and the Greek and Australian press. A second resolution called upon the Greek government to release its political prisoners and to cease persecution of Greek trade unionists. On the question of providing relief to the victims of Greece's civil war, the conference meeting resolved that participating organisations should hold meetings amongst their respective memberships to form relief committees that would undertake the responsibility, in collaboration with the Red Cross, to collect and send support to those in need (CGOA Minutes, 16 October 1948:2).

To be sure, the dire situation in Greece at the time was foremost in the minds of the delegates but their approach to their historic gathering as representatives of the Greek organisations of Australia was not straightforwardly a matter of voicing their nationalist ties to the homeland. On the contrary, when Vasilis Stefanou reported on these matters he linked the handling of the question of support for democracy in Greece to that of "the issues that affected Greeks in Australia and the cultivation of friendly relations with the Australian people". Stefanou appealed to the history of Greek migration and the economic and political reasons underlying migration, he outlined the limited role that the GOCs were playing since their energies had been absorbed by power struggles with the Greek Church authorities in Australia, and he spoke of the dominance of the narrowly focused "regionalism" amongst the fraternal regional organisations. Highlighting differences in the socio-economic position and needs of the "old migrants" as compared with the "new migrants" who were arriving following the introduction of Australia's mass migration program, Stefanou emphasised the need to cooperate with the Australian people particularly through involvement in the strong trade unions and progressive organisations of this country. In his opinion such cooperation would contribute significantly to the reduction of the prevailing "anti-foreigner feeling". The discussion concluded with the adoption of a resolution:

Following an assessment of the position of Australia's Greeks a conference of Greek organisations expresses its concern for the presence of anti-foreigner feeling and maintains that it is in the interests of Greeks and Australians to co-operate on matters of mutual interest through trade unions and progressive Australian organisations (CGOA Minutes, 16 October 1948:23).

Significantly for our purposes, in his capacity as the Greek Democritus League representative Stefanou argued that the formation of a national body of confederating Greek organisations in Australia would constitute the most effective means of co-ordinating the various dimensions of the Greek migrants' voluntary work. Having endorsed the proposal unanimously, the meeting proceeded to elect a provisional committee charged with the responsibility of circulating a draft constitution. It was further decided that the organisations would hold local meetings to enable members to discuss and review the draft constitution, following which process a second national conference would be called to endorse the new constitution and formally establish the confederation.

## The inaugural conference

A second follow up conference was indeed held on 29 and 30 October 1949. It was preceded, as had been the hope, by a considerable level of preparation consisting not only of local meetings to discuss the articles of the new constitution but also of the preparation and circulation by the provisional committee of the *Democratic Bulletin* as well as at least one bilingual leaflet on the "fourth anniversary of imperialist intervention in Greece". The *Bulletin* was to serve as a means of informing members Australia-wide, not merely of official policies, but of members' everyday activities and struggles. To achieve this it called for members' active support, including financial support, for its production.

The second conference delegates outlined the work of the participating organisations in providing relief for their troubled compatriots in Greece. A considerable amount of voluntary work effort went into collecting and dispatching clothing and other non-perishables. In addition to carrying out its nominated responsibilities, the provisional committee had also represented the confederating Greek organisations at the peace conferences that had taken place around Australia in the previous year. The provisional committee presented its support for Australian peace initiatives as integral to the Confederation's aspirations of promoting peace both within Greece and in the world more generally. The conference participants also noted that they had pursued a number of opportunities to establish contact and develop a working relationship with progressive Australian organisations. At the same time they lamented the indifference of some other Greek community organisations that had refused to work co-operatively.

As well as repeating the actions of the previous year's conference, such as passing a second resolution addressed to the United Nations and voicing concerns about the situation in Greece, this time the conference meeting focused on establishing the democratic processes that were to guide and inform the internal life of the confederation. To begin with the meeting formulated a clear statement of the relationship between the central body and its member organisations. According to the conference minutes:



the confederation aims, not to impose itself upon and to restrict its member organisations, but to support and cultivate their independent activities and to assist in the resolution of their organisational problems (CGOA Minutes, 28–29 October 1949).

## **A constitution for the Confederation of Greek Organisations**

The main item on the conference agenda was the adoption of the Confederation Constitution. The first article of the new organisation offers a snapshot of how the participants constituted their transnational identity as Australians of Greek origin. It reads:

We the representatives of various Greek organisations — who strongly believe in the democratic ideals; and in the fundamental principle that the ethical, spiritual and financial advancement and success of individuals can only be achieved with the freedom guaranteed to them by a democratic state; and that for this reason every free person has the duty to defend above all the institution of democracy with every legal means available — at a meeting on 28 and 29 October 1949 have formed the Confederation of Greek Organisations in Australia, with the following aims:

- a) to support world peace, the return of peace to Greece and the support of a regime that is accepted by a majority of the Greek people and the independence of Greece from every form of foreign control or influence;
- b) to co-ordinate member organisations' efforts to defend the democratic ideals and the state of democracy in Australia against every foreign attack of whatever form;
- c) co-ordinate member organisations' efforts to promote humanitarian relief within Greece and outside its borders to persons who have contributed to the struggle for freedom and to the victims of the Greek civil war irrespective of their political affiliations;
- d) to contribute to the organisation of Greek life in Australia in the areas of community politics, educational and cultural developments;
- e) to struggle against anti-foreigner feeling and to cultivate friendly relations with Australian democratic organisations;
- f) to provide support to new Greek migrants and to assist in their free absorption into the Australian people (CCGOA, 28–29 October 1949).

According to the second article of the Constitution, “the means of achieving the Confederation aims shall be the education of Greek-Australians upon progressive lines so that they may become a worthwhile part of Australian society as well as being valued within their own communities and in their personal lives” (CCGOA, 28–29 October 1949).

After adopting the Constitution the meeting endorsed a number of actions deemed essential for the implementation of the constitutional aims. It resolved, firstly, to examine the problem of Greek migrant women and assist with the development and encouragement of Greek women's participation in issues of public concern; secondly, to pursue co-operation with Australian organisations in order to advance peace efforts; thirdly, that, as a matter of urgency, member organisations establish local action groups to promote reconciliation in Greece and to continue the relief work; and, fourthly, to inform newly arriving Greek migrants about the conditions of life in Australia and to assist them with English language training. To promote its program more effectively, the meeting also decided to employ an organiser on a full-time basis (CCGOA, 28–29 October 1949).

## Beyond the nationalist discourses of the time

As we have argued more extensively elsewhere, the Confederation Constitution marks the first occasion in the history of the organised Greek-Australian communities when the practice of asserting members' identity as *Australian* citizens of Greek origin was promoted as an Australia-wide stance towards asserting an *active* conception of citizenship and political agency. Without minimising the problems to do with the dominance of regionalism within the communities and the gendered realities of their situation, the Confederation founders had managed to formulate their conception of Australian citizenship on the basis of the *universal* values of democracy and freedom at the same time as drawing upon their *particular* ethnicity — Greekness understood in terms of addressing the needs of fellow Greeks living in Greece or settling in Australia — to inform the practice of these values (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2002; 2004a:178–183). Moreover, they took up this challenge collectively to define their Australian political identity at a time when the white Australian state was beginning only superficially to chip away at the long-standing historical conflation of Australian citizenship with British national origins. Whereas the Nationality and Citizenship Act of 1948 had only just introduced the legal notion of the “Australian citizen” to replace that of the “British subject” (Chesterman and Galligan, 1999:29), on a broader political level in this period the white Australian authorities continued to position southern European Australians as perpetual-foreigners-within the nation-state, even as they were shifting from a greater reliance on an image of the subversive foreigner to that of the compliant foreigner in conformity with the demands of the then newly implemented mass migration program (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004b).

The process leading up to and following the Confederation's establishment in this climate gave rise to a particular transnational community that was not co-extensive with the category of “migrants of Greek origin”. Rather, it consisted specifically of the member organisations (collectivities) and their respective memberships (individuals) who self-consciously adopted the principles of democratic association enshrined



in the Confederation Constitution often in defiance of the expectations of them as members of the designated “foreigner communities”. Significantly, for our purposes, the actions of the community of conference delegates and those whom they represented do demonstrate ties to their country of origin, most notably by contributing to the war relief effort. So on a rather superficial level they seem to conform to the descriptive conception of transnationalism we outlined above. However, the actions in question do much more in the normative terms of contributing to the generation of a new discourse that this descriptive account fails to identify. For in the process of setting up a new organisational structure and working towards their goals, this particular transnational community also transformed the meaning of the very conditions giving rise to the urgent need to maintain their ties with Greece. By linking their actions on the one hand in relation to the relief effort and international campaigns for the release of Greece’s political prisoners and on the other in relation to the extensive settlement needs of Greek migrants to Australia, the Confederation founders asserted a *radical equality* with other (non-Greek) Australians. That is, they claimed their identity as active Australian citizens, not by conforming to the white Australian state’s expectations of them *as migrants* or *as foreigners* indebted to the British Australian hosts. Instead, they positioned *the democratic system itself* as the point of reference that defined their equal citizenship. They insisted that only a working system of democracy serves as the institutional guarantor of individual freedom, whether this is lived in post-civil war Greece or in Australia in the wake of another war, being waged this time against the striking Mt Isa Miners ahead of Robert Menzies’ first electoral victory amid the anti-communist hysteria that was born of the cold-war climate (Louis, 2001). In doing so they generated a new transnational discourse that linked the freedom of each individual and member organisation of the Confederation to each person’s duty and willingness to protect this freedom by defending it against all forms of attack on the fundamental principles of democratic life regardless of where it is lived. Indeed they represented such a defence of democracy as integral to an appreciation of the meaning of individual freedom and in this way pointed to its connections with more specific rights, such as freedom of speech and freedom from political persecution. Both these latter were in the process of being denied to labour movement and political activists in both Greece and Australia. In this way, the Confederation led the way towards linking the wider Greek-Australian communities with the emerging rights discourses of the times.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> On this rights discourse in connection with Australia’s migrant and ethnic communities see Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2007.

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